

'Substance Or Shadow?'

By Haynes Johnson

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"THE BODY is that of a muscular, well-developed and well-nourished adult Caucasian male measuring 72½ inches and weighing approximately 170 pounds. . . . The hair is reddish brown and abundant, the eyes are blue. . . ."

Even that grim autopsy report, with its clinical descriptions of massive wounds and incisions and condition of lungs, heart, abdominal cavity and skeletal system, contained strangely personal language that made us feel, again, a terrible sense of sudden loss. From then to now, John F. Kennedy has had more of a hold over us in death than he ever had in life.

A decade has passed. Once again the newsstands and bookstores are filled with an outpouring of Kennedy reminiscences. Jack and Jackie, Caroline and John-John, grace and beauty, charm and Camelot. Remember? Aside from this artificial anniversary date, what difference does it really make? Ten years after Dallas we still cannot resolve whether the Kennedy legacy was one of substance or shadow.

IT MAY WELL BE that the most ironic legacy Kennedy left us is his death. The Kennedy assassination brought home the shattering fact of the mortality of our highest leaders. Until that first bullet was fired from the Texas School Book Depository building at the motorcade below in Dealey Plaza, our Presidents were becoming as exalted as emperors of old. They were not mere mortals; they were Presidents, half enshrined in myth and accorded public awe and reverence from the moment they were inaugurated. Their times in office were not just elected terms; they presided over "eras." John Kennedy's murder taught us how fleeting those eras can be, and how fallible the men who personify them are.

Fate and events have been unkind to our Presidents since that day in Dallas. Lyndon Johnson was driven from office by the people who overwhelmingly elected him.

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White House, April 1963—John F. Kennedy Library photo

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Richard Nixon, after a similarly great victory, stands in danger of historic disgrace. The thought of his impeachment is no longer unthinkable. And the country itself has endured a series of seemingly unending shocks over this past decade.

The Kennedy assassination was the first of those blows. Since then, nothing has seemed secure or certain. Assassinations of public men that followed his own—another Kennedy, King, Malcolm X, the nearly-fatal assault on Wallace—have brought home the realization that no man, no matter how high or well-protected, is safe. Riots have raised questions not only

about the survival of our cities, but our system. Power blackouts, fuel shortages and pollution alerts have created an awareness of how dependent society has become on elements beyond the control of most citizens—or beyond the control of anyone. Corruption and subversion extending to the Oval Office of the White House itself have made us despair about national honor and integrity.

With good reason we have learned not to trust so blindly nor to believe so implicitly in our leaders. If we are not yet a cynical society, we are in danger of becoming one. We are finding it easier to believe in a multitude of conspiracy theories. An atmosphere

of doubt and suspicion still surrounds both Kennedy and King assassinations. Proof of governmental deception has come to light over Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers, My Lai and the American atrocities, Watergate and its cover-up.

That is not to suggest the Kennedy legacy has been all negative and disillusioning. The brief Kennedy years (only two years, 10 months, and two days) were the last times when America experienced a collective sense of well-being. Now, those years seem incredibly innocent. At the time, the country appeared calm and basically content.

There was no great dissent. There were no riots, no assassinations. It was possible to believe—and many Americans did—that there were no real problems, certainly none our leaders couldn't solve, including the old bugaboo threat of communism. We were just entering, it seemed, our most powerful period, a time when America could do anything it wished at home or abroad, when we were unchallenged either militarily or economically, when we could fight wars overseas against our ideological enemies and wars at home against poverty—and win them all. Whether we were arrogant or naive, confidence prevailed. Kennedy perfectly suited the national mood. As Sen. Fulbright said, "He made me proud of my country."

In the Kennedy years we thought our days were filled with crisis and action and "progress"—Birmingham and Oxford, Miss., and the Negroes (no blacks among us then); Alan Shepard, John Glenn, Cape Canaveral and the space age; Fidel Castro, the Berlin Wall and standing up to Khrushchev in the missile crisis; 50-mile hikes and James Bond, Vaughn Meader and the Beatles; New Frontiersmen and the Peace Corps.

Those years were not, of course, benign. The Cold War was still with us. Racial tensions were on the rise. Increasingly bitter ideological arguments divided us: The John Birch Society found Kennedy too liberal, too soft; the liberals thought him too hesitant, too political (less profile, more courage, some of them were saying). But through it all Kennedy moved surely and confidently.

His popularity was astonishing. After the Bay of Pigs invasion, 83 per cent of all Americans approved the way he was acting. For virtually his entire time in office, the Gallup Poll showed that nearly 3 out of 4 citizens backed him.

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IN THIS PRESENT period of national suspicion and distrust, it's difficult to understand why Kennedy seemed

special. Certainly not all Americans loved him. Indeed, many hated and feared him. But no one was immune to him. From the moment he announced his candidacy in the marbled splendor of the old Senate Caucus Room on Jan. 2, 1960, until the end in Dallas, he commanded America's attention as no one since. He seemed so perfect a break with the past. He had everything Americans always admired: youth, energy, power, wit, wealth, charm, good looks, a record as a true war hero, a glamorous wife, lovely children. He promised exciting times, and carefully cultivated the impression of action. He accepted nomination on the West Coast and pointedly said he was facing west toward a "new frontier." On his inauguration day, a day so crisp, cold and clear that it immediately became part of the myth, he stood bareheaded, without a coat, as he called out a summons in brisk tones:

"Let the word go forth, from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans . . . now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to arms, though arms we need—not as a call to battle, though embattled we are—but a call to bear the burdens of a long twilight struggle . . ."

Read these words today and something else comes through. He was martial, belligerent, strident. It was Kennedy who cast such phrases as advising our enemies that "those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside"; Kennedy who spoke of an "hour of national peril" in his first address to Congress; Kennedy who reminded the nation that the American eagle holds both the olive branch and a bundle of arrows in its talons; Kennedy who devoted so much energy—and national treasure—to strengthening America's military arsenal; Kennedy who launched the Bay of Pigs and the Green Berets; Kennedy who accelerated the space budget and said if we could get to the moon before the Russians we should; Kennedy who spoke relatively little about domestic needs or a questioning of national priorities.

And it was Kennedy who set us firmly on the long tortuous road to Vietnam. All these, too, were Kennedy's legacies.

The new historical revisionists are reminding us that Kennedy's exhortations, his rhetoric and fighting stance, entrapped us in situations where

American power and will were negated. One price of Camelot was Vietnam. No young Arthur emerged to extricate us from disaster abroad and national disunity at home. Surely that legacy has diminished Kennedy's place in our affections. Romance and myth-making, we now see, do not wear well in this constantly changing society. I doubt if anyone today really believes that Jack Kennedy was a young prince of the realm ruling over a court of knights and their ladies fair.

Many scholars are offering other criticisms. Kennedy's excessive promises, they say, raised popular expectations that led eventually to general frustration when they were unfulfilled. Richard Nixon chose opposite themes in his presidential campaign of 1968. We should avoid grand promises, lower our voices and work at bringing our society together. Nixon's themes were correct and the people approved—and then his promises, too, were unfulfilled.

There is something else. A debunking tone runs through many of the Kennedy reminiscences now being published. But the Kennedy legacy will not be determined only by the myth-makers—or breakers. We wept for Kennedy 10 years ago for more fundamental reasons than his specific successes or failures. We sorrowed because, at his best, he made it seem possible to believe we could be better; because he inspired a sense of confidence, trust and purpose; because to millions he represented the pursuit of excellence in national life.

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ALL RIGHT. The artificial milestone is here, the preliminary assessments are being rendered. There is no consensus on Kennedy at the moment. It is too soon for any final verdict. But something curious has happened to those of us who were affected by the Kennedy years. Some liberals and conservatives who began by opposing Kennedy, such men as Michael Harrington and Richard J. Whalen, now see him in a far more favorable perspective. Some of us in the center, we who felt bereft at the news 10 years ago, today either are ambivalent or disillusioned—or simply don't care. And some, possibly a majority, still cling to a belief that Kennedy represented a special, indefinable quality that has been missing from national life since Dallas.

None of us saw him clearly—either then or now.

It was one of the ironies of his life that John Kennedy, a practical, tough, essentially conservative Irish politician, seemed too liberal for the times. Yet he was riding the crest of his personal popularity when he quoted a poem, "Westward, look, the land is

bright," and set out for Dallas on that November day in 1963, leaving behind a tantalizing sense of what-might-have-been and a void no one else has been able to fill.

But the decade since Dallas has taught us not to rely on any one man. Despite all the difficult problems of these years, despite the erosion of confidence and loss of faith, the American people have shown a remarkable resiliency in times of crisis. They responded with patience, fortitude and determination when Kennedy was killed. They have continued to respond that way in all the times of trouble since.